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Conceptualising ethical consumption within theories of practice

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century, sociological consumer research has had a strong focus on ordinary, routinised consumption, especially within the sustainability context. This approach has been a welcome alternative when understanding sustainable consumption compared with relying on individualistic psychological or identity-communicative approaches. However, with the shift towards a practice theoretical approach, there has been a tendency to ignore variation in consumer practices. Specifically, questions regarding the extent to which ethical concern can explain variance have not yet been included. Important questions, such as whether and how ethics takes part in changing practices in more sustainable directions, have similarly been neglected. This theoretically based paper intends to contribute to further developing theories of practice by bringing together three discussions: how variation in carrying and performing practices can be conceptualised, how different approaches to consumption have conceptualised ethics, and how ethics of care and the concept of general understandings can be used to conceptualise ethical aspects of consumption within theories of practice. The paper concludes by summarising the findings from these discussions and raising questions of further empirical and theoretical concern.

Introduction

Two decades ago, parts of European sociology of consumption turned away from primarily studying spectacular and culturally significant consumption to focus on ordinary, everyday consumption (Gronnow and Warde, 2001; Warde, 2014). This focus was welcomed, especially from an environmental perspective, because most unsustainable Western consumption was considered related to escalating demands in everyday life (Shove, 2003). This shift in empirical focus in the sociology of consumption came with the concurrent practice theoretical turn within social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001). Theories of practice were first introduced to the sociology of consumption by Alan Warde (2005) but have since been employed further (Halkier et al., 2011; Welch et al., 2020). Among the applications related to sustainable consumption is the work by Shove et al., who strongly focused on the importance of materiality for understanding the trajectories of practices and its related change in consumption over time (Shove et al., 2012). However, this focus on materiality and trajectories in practices has been at the expense of studying social or cultural variations in practices, and Shove et al. argued against using theories of practice to study variation (Shove and Walker, 2014). Other scholars within consumer research have been more interested in studying social and cultural variations and have called for further development within theories of practice to better address this (Southerton et al., 2012; Warde, 2005).

This paper takes the position that focusing on the routine and technology-bound aspects of everyday life is paramount from a sustainability perspective. Understanding how practices develop over time in more resource-intensive directions is equally important. However, this should not contrast with understanding how the performance of practices varies across socioeconomic groups or from a cross-cultural perspective.

One reason for being interested in variation relates to understanding the dynamics of how practices develop. Considerable interest has been devoted to the dynamics of social practices (Gram-Hanssen, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Shove et al., 2012). However, this has not previously included dynamics between different groups of people, even though this was among the core contributions from Bourdieu's (1986) study of distinction. Bourdieu did not include how ethical consumption relates to social groups, although a more recent study followed up on this (Carfagna et al., 2014). This analysis stays within a Bourdieusian approach of habitus as mediating between the actor and structures rather than following the practice turn and placing practices at the centre. Inspiration from studies of ethical consumption may still contribute with input on developing theories of practice further to include questions of how ethics take part in social practice dynamics. In this development, researchers can draw on contributions on how to conceptualise culture or larger phenomena threading through different practices (Hui et al., 2017; Welch et al., 2020).

This paper is interested in ethical consumption concerning sustainability. Sustainable consumption has been defined as consumption which minimizes impacts on the environment to secure human needs for present and future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) where natural science is important in measuring the impact on the environment. In comparison, ethical consumption relates to broader perspectives of what is right and wrong and a social science understanding of consumption, including cultural understandings of the ideas of right and wrong. Ethical consumption include other aspects than those related to impact on environment (e.g. fair pay and safe working conditions), though this paper focuses on environmental impact. Consuming with less impact on the environment, may relate to economic constraints or other socio-material conditions, thus analysing environmental impact related to consumer practices have to include both social-material variations and cultural ethical understandings.

This article aims to discuss and develop theories of practice addressing sociocultural variation and understanding ethics in consumption. The paper brings together different contributions to achieve this. The first question is how to understand variation in practices among different types of people. The second question is how to understand ethical consumption within different approaches to sociological consumer theories. Finally, the last question is how to understand the concept and grounds of ethics within theories of practice. Before proceeding with these contributions, the following paragraphs first present the main ideas within theories of practice to provide a starting point for each of the following sections.

Basis of Theories of Practice in Consumer Research

Theories of practice have influenced several social science disciplines since "the practice turn" (Schatzki et al., 2001) with consumer studies being one of them (Welch et al., 2020). The practice turn includes different approaches within consumer studies; work by Schatzki (1996, 2002) and Reckwitz (2002) has been especially influential. Following these authors to understand the social, scholars should focus on the practices rather than on people who carry the practices or the surrounding structures. Practices consist of sayings and doings held together across time and space by different elements, such as know-how, meanings, understanding, and teleo-affectivity, which have been named and numbered with slight variations by different authors (Gram-Hanssen, 2011). As coordinated entities of doings and sayings, practices are sustained and reproduced by practices as performance, which involves the individual carrying out activities singled out by practical intelligibility. Thus, a recursive relationship exists between practices as entities and practices as performances, with the individual as the unique crossing point of many different practices (Reckwitz, 2002: 256). Especially within consumer research, when explaining the essence of the theories of practice, they are often contrasted with theories relying on models of a sovereign and

expressive individual consumer, where know-how, shared understanding, habits, and routine are contrasted with motivation, reasoning, and acting (Warde, 2014).

Practices also relate to each other and form compounds, bundles, or complexes. Bundles of practices are loose-knit patterns based on the colocation of practices, whereas complexes are more integrated combinations of practices, which can be so dense that they constitute new entities of practices (Shove et al., 2012). Warde (2013) addressed compounds of practices and described how eating could be viewed as a composite or compound practice consisting of the integrative practices of supplying food, cooking, organising the meal, and the aesthetic judgement of taste. Further, Schatzki (2002) discussed how the social world consists of a plurality of practices.

Finally, practice can be analysed as a temporal phenomenon in which practices constitute time and consume time (Shove, 2009). Thus, different practices compete for time in our everyday lives; however, we experience time through the practices we perform or do not perform. For instance, a weekend can be understood as a weekend because we do not work over the weekend. Furthermore, practices are performed at certain times of the day with a certain duration and are ordered according to each other in certain sequences (Southerton, 2013).

In his seminal paper, Alan Warde (2005) introduced theories of practice to consumer studies referring to people as carriers of practices and defining consumption as moments in practices related to appropriation and appreciation (Warde, 2005), later also including acquisition (Evans, 2019; Warde, 2014). From a sustainable consumption perspective, devaluation, divestment, and disposal of objects and materials should be included in the definition of consumption (Evans, 2018, 2019). Thus, a consumer can be conceptualised as a carrier of practices, which include moments of appropriation, appreciation, acquisition, devaluation, divestment, and disposal.

Social Variation in the Performance and Carrying of Practices

This introduction to theories of practice within consumer research can be used to discuss social variance. If elements, such as materiality, know-how, competencies, and meanings, hold practices together, then I propose, with inspiration from Warde (2005), that how these elements vary among people according to socioeconomics and local contexts implies variations in the carrying and performance of practices. Likewise, if practices form bundles or complexes in different ways in the everyday life of diverse people, then I propose that this is also important in understanding variations in the carrying and performance of practices. With inspiration from Southerton (2013), how practices form bundles or complexes also has a temporal aspect, which implies that the timing, sequences, and duration of practices vary between different types of people, influencing how these people perform practices. Putting these assumptions together, Table 1 presents an overview and examples of what I propose this variation could imply concerning (un)sustainable consumption.

Table 1: Examples of how the carrying and performance of practices may vary among different people. The left side of the table is developed in reference to the introduction of theories of practice in the previous paragraph

| Variation in | Related to | Literature examples |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Materiality and possessions | Different economic and geographical situations imply access to different housing, technology, and infrastructure | Affluence can be considered the main factor of household energy consumption and environmental impact (Ivanova et al., 2017; Wiedenhofer et al., 2018) |

| Variation in | Related to | Literature examples |
|--|---|--|
| Competencies and know-how | <p>Different social upbringings imply differences in competencies (e.g., gender differences in what practices are expected to be performed and carried)</p> <p>Differences in experience with new technology among generations imply that younger people can better manage new information technology</p> | <p>Men often perform do-it-yourself projects and tinker with electronics in homes, and the (sustainable) practice of repairing items rather than throwing them out can only be performed by those with necessary competencies (Christensen et al., 2019)</p> <p>Taking advantage of smart home technology to control energy is often more assessable to younger people (Larsen and Gram-Hanssen, 2020)</p> |
| Meanings and norms | Different people attach different meanings to the same practice or relate specific groups of people to eco-friendly practices | <p>Meanings related to manual labour and local food have been shown to differ by social class in a study of how eco-habitus can be understood (Carfagna et al., 2014)</p> <p>People view eco-friendly practices as strongly related to specific groups and normative standards (Dubuisson-Quellier and Gojard, 2016)</p> |
| Relations between practice, including temporal aspects | Different family situations (e.g., related to lifecycles) imply differences in the ordering and relations between practices | Households with small children have more difficulty with time-shifting practices to accommodate the electric grid needs (e.g., running a washing machine at night) due to other practices that must be coordinated in the morning (Friis and Christensen, 2016; Nicholls and Strengers, 2018) |

According to Warde (2005: 138), practices are internally differentiated by avenues, such as experience, technical knowledge, resources, and previous encouragement by others. In his view of social variation in the performance of practices, Warde criticised Bourdieu and how he handled internal differentiation in practices. According to Warde, Bourdieu placed the dynamics of practices outside of them, thus attributing extensive power to the concept of habitus. The understanding from Bourdieu centres on the effects of general and transposable dispositions rather than on the practices (Warde, 2005: 138). Thus, according to Bourdieu (1986), social differentiations arose from class-based structures and perceptions rather than from recruitments to particular practices. This has implications for understanding the social dynamics of how practices change. Rather than focusing on how lower social classes imitate and copy consumer practices of higher social classes, for example, we should be examining how practices ‘travel’ from one context to another (Pantzar and Shove, 2010). Nonetheless, with inspiration from recent arguments of not forgetting all learning from cultural consumer studies (Welch et al., 2020), I propose that understanding how meanings, status, distinctions, and norms are part of a practice and vary among people (e.g., according to gender or social class) can affect how a practice may or may not travel..

Questions of social variation in the performance of practices in combination with how practices change over time have been at the centre of a study on reading (Southerton et al., 2012). Based on time-use surveys, the study included different ways of dealing with differentiation in practices. The participants’ socioeconomic and demographic characteristics were included in the analysis in all these ways, leading to a critique of the view of cultural homogenisation in consumer cultures within theories of practice. Focusing on the practice of showering Gram-Hanssen et al (2019) suggested that temporalities, including what time of day showering occurs, vary socially (e.g., with office workers normally taking showers in the morning and people working manual jobs showering in the afternoon). However, the rules governing the practice are the same across these social variations (e.g., showering before socialising and after manual work).

Variation in these cases refers to the variation in the performance of specific practices, although variation can also relate to who is carrying which practices, reflecting the differences between practices as performance and practices as entities. Human life includes practices related to food, clothing, housing, communication, and mobility, and a change in how these practices are performed is needed from a sustainability perspective. For example, practices related to food should move in a more vegetarian direction (Jallinoja et al., 2019), and clothing practices should involve fewer new fabrics and less washing (Jack, 2013). In these situations, the variations in the *performance* of a practice are relevant. Other practices, such as car driving, can be so resource-intensive that a sustainable future involving these practices must die out and be replaced by other forms of mobility.

Determining whether something is a variation in a practice or should be considered a different practice is a question of what defines and delimitates a practice. Warde (2014) argued that what defines whether something is a practice is whether it is possible to write a manual on it, whether it can be included in a time-use survey, whether disputes exist about the performance standards, and whether specialised equipment is related to the performance. In some of Schatzki's writing, he distinguished between integrated and dispersed practices, wherein dispersed practices, such as questioning, reporting, or examining, can be part of many different integrated practices (Schatzki, 1996). Integrated practices are far more complex. According to Schatzki (1996), an important difference is that, whereas dispersed practices are guided only by rules and understanding, integrated practices are also held together by teleo-affectivity. Teleo is about having a goal, and affectivity implies that something affects us and is meaningful. Teleo-affectivity as guiding practices implies that a goal and meaning exist related to performing the specific practice. Following the argument, that teleo-affectivity distinguishes an integrated practice from a dispersed practice, I propose that teleo-affectivity is the defining aspect of a practice, a definition which I consider in line with that from Warde (2014).

This paragraph presents a systematic approach to how variation in practices between different types of people can be understood within theories of practice. Some practices are more sustainable (have less impact on the environment) than others, as are some ways of performing them, although this does often not relate to the people carrying or performing the practice being aware of this. Affluent people generally have higher resource consumption (Ivanova et al., 2017; Wiedenhofer et al., 2018), which is relevant from an energy justice perspective (Jenkins et al., 2016), acknowledging that limited resources are available. Thus, understanding social variation in practices is relevant for several reasons, including understanding the dynamics of how practices change and travel and understanding inequalities in resource use in the present society.

Different Approaches to Ethical Consumption Within Consumer Research

The performance and carrying of practices thus vary with sociodemographic characteristics, which may influence how practices change and travel. A specific interest in this paper is how to analyse the extent to which the performance and carrying of practices also varies regarding ethical consumption and whether this has a role to play in developing more sustainable practices. The idea of an ethical consumer has often been criticised from sociological perspectives. For instance, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007a) questioned what they called the generic active consumer model. They highlighted that consumers are framed by markets, governance structures, and everyday life, and purchasing decisions most often overlap and conflict with other concerns. In addition, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) viewed ethical consumerism as part of an ever more liberalistic world economy, where nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) support this idea of a sovereign, active, and responsible consumer by giving credibility to different types of products and businesses. Thus, based on such arguments, they conveyed that the ethical burden of saving the world

should not be laid on the shoulders of the individual consumer but should be handled at the governmental policy level (see also (Barnett et al., 2010; Evans, 2011; Evans et al., 2017)).

Whether such criticism is relevant or not depends on how consumption and consumers are understood. Drawing from some of the historical readings of the sociology of consumption (Featherstone, 1990; Gronnow and Warde, 2001; Warde, 2014), it is evident that the consumer has been conceptualised in various ways. Although this paper takes a specific theories of practice perspective, it is still relevant to consider how ethical consumption may be defined depending on how the consumer is conceptualised theoretically. In Table 2, with inspiration from Featherstone (1990), Gronnow and Warde (2001), and Warde (2014), the left side lists the understanding of consumers, and the right side suggests the related understanding of ethical consumption.

Table 2: Examples of how consumers have been conceptualised within sociology and suggestions for conceptualising ethical consumption concerning how consumers are understood. Left is developed with inspiration from historical accounts of consumer studies (Featherstone, 1990; Gronnow and Warde, 2001; Warde, 2014); the right is the author's addition.

| Conceptualisation of consumers | Suggested related conceptualisation of ethical consumption or ethical consumers |
|---|--|
| Victims in a capitalistic market | New capitalistic marketplace |
| Sovereign rational consumers | Followers of prizes, information, or values of sustainability |
| Distinction and class followers | New types of distinction and classes |
| Postmodern creative (groups of) consumers | Creating their own or group identity of sustainability |
| Carriers of practices, which include moments related to consumption | Carriers of practices, which include moments related to what the carriers consider ethical consumption |

In the following paragraphs, I examine the ideas in Table 2 and discuss different ethical consumer approaches, including adding references to exemplify. This should not be taken as a thorough literature review of ethical consumption. Rather, it shows how discussions and analyses of ethical consumption relate to the approach taken in understanding consumption. However, this reading is also about learning from other approaches, even acknowledging that some points and critics are irrelevant from the theories of practice perspective that I take.

Examining the table and returning to some of the Marxist scholars, consumers were primarily conceptualised as victims in the capitalistic market with little possibility of choosing or influencing. Following this, ethical consumption may be viewed as a new market opportunity for the capitalistic market, a view that may hold, despite which approach one takes concerning consumption. Another learning from early Marxist approach to consumption concerns commodity fetishism, which can be reframed as a hypothesis about affluent consumers lacking any knowledge about the origins of the products they consume (Barnett et al., 2010). Marxist approaches to consumption faded away before the 1990s when ethical consumption issues entered the scene. Therefore, they are not prevailing in the ethical consumption literature.

Next in the table is the sovereign rational consumer, which can hardly be considered a sociological understanding of consumption. Rather, this is an economic or psychological approach, often used by consumer sociologists to contrast their ideas of collective understanding (Warde, 2014). In contrast, both behavioural economists (Berger, 2019) and psychologists (Whitmarsh et al., 2011) have argued that

learning from sociology, especially about the importance of the context, may improve their understanding of the ethical consumer.

Understanding consumers in light of social classes and distinction, as presented in Table 2, builds on the classical work by Bourdieu (1986) on distinction as an approach to understanding consumption and taste. As mentioned, Bourdieu did not include ethical consumption as part of distinction; however, more recent studies have shown how this may be included (Carfagna et al., 2014; Dubuisson-Quellier and Gojard, 2016). Although white, upper-middle-class people, for instance, draw on an ethical eating repertoire to a greater extent than other demographics, this does not imply that low-income or racialised people are amoral or less concerned with these issues (Johnston et al., 2011). They just have other resources and constraints for purchasing. Even it can, and should, be argued that much of consumption is routine and mundane (Gronnow and Warde, 2001), and that consumer theory has previously exaggerated the conspicuous part of consumption, it is still relevant to remember that distinctions can be important in explaining consumption (Evans, 2019). Moreover, questions of race, class, and gender always play some role in this.

The more influential sociological consumption research approaches include the consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and its strong interest in identity. The idea of the postmodern, creative consumer who is influential in CCT can be considered a reaction to the structural understanding of the consumer as someone who follows the market or class-based rules, and the postmodern creative consumer is part of the more radical approaches of the cultural turn (Warde, 2014). From this perspective, the consumer communicates through consumption, as also understood in work by Bourdieu (1986). However, the consumer combines products, styles, and ideas to create their individual or group-based identity in a creative assemblage of different mass-produced goods, going beyond what commercial markets offer by including a bricolage (Featherstone, 1990).

Following this line of thought, ethical consumption can include approaches that define ethical as a creative act through which consumers define and construct their identity based on ideas of sustainability through consumption. For example, a study took the position that consumer choices are the extension of the self in the sense that consumers adopt products and practices congruent with their personality, lifestyle, and social role (Papaoikonomou et al., 2016). A study of an eco-village focused on how members sanction each other's practices and how a practice of sustainable consumption was established accordingly, and the authors used this in explaining the concept's fluidity (Denegri-Knott et al., 2018). Thus, in these ethical consumption approaches, the identity and its construction and fluidity become the core of the analysis.

Conceptualising consumers as carriers of practices is the approach taken in this paper. This approach is not prevailing in ethical consumption studies, as much research on sustainable consumption within theories of practice has labelled ethical consumption as an individualised approach and has distanced itself from this. However, some studies focusing on discourse, culture, and ambiguity in everyday consumption exist from which to draw inspiration.

First, Keller and Halkier's (2014) work focused on understanding media discourse in everyday practices related to contested consumption. Consumption may be contested for environmental or other ethical reasons, and be part of what Keller and Halkier investigated when asking how media discourse affects everyday practices and consumption. Using the vocabulary from Warde (2005), they described how 'understandings of practices can draw on media discourses, procedures for practices can be inspired by or mimed from media discourses, and engagement in practices can be argued on the basis of normative contestation of consumption in those discourses' (Keller and Halkier, 2014: 39). Thus, in this way, Keller and Halkier described how consumers in their everyday lives could bring public discourse on what is good or

bad into their specific performance, although they warn that we should not over-anticipate the power of media discourse. Furthermore, consumers experience media discourse as pulling them in different directions, thus leaving them to relate their routines in ambiguous ways.

When consumers must handle ambiguity and tension in everyday life, social interaction can contribute to understanding the relationship between the tacit and the reflexive in practices (Halkier, 2020). Social interaction can facilitate coordination between people. It can make intersections between different practices more visible, and it can highlight the hybrid character of routines and reflexivity. Finally, social interaction can achieve normative accountability, and thus explicate what is the right thing to do. Following this, I would add that ethics (what is right or wrong) is to find in hybrids of routine and reflexivity with social interaction as a facilitator. People discussing what is right implies a foundation, though objects of sustainable consumption are often intangible, for instance, the indoor climate. A way of dealing with this was demonstrated in living lab experiments, making the microclimate a cultural artefact that people can handle and discuss (Sahakian et al., 2020). Ethical consumption is also about making use of resources visible and communicating (scientific) knowledge.

Questions of communication about consumption are related along the same lines as presented in Table 2. A paper analysed different apps communicating about the ethical aspects of consumer products (Humphery and Jordan, 2018). The paper distinguishes between apps with digitalised, previously written guides and apps with more interactive options, including allowing consumers to interact and authorise information. The paper further differentiates between individual purchase choices and social movements. This approach to differentiating communication resamples how Halkier (2017) distinguished between four different types of understanding of science communication to the public. Halkier identified 1) the deficit model that transfers knowledge to consumers, 2) the segmentation model where consumers are segmented according to cultural and social backgrounds, 3) network understanding where people discuss the knowledge they obtained, and 4) dialogical understanding where consumers are active in producing knowledge themselves. Halkier (2017) proposed a fifth version, a theories of practice approach, which emphasises how new knowledge must always be taken into bodily routines in everyday life.

In summary, I uphold the critique of the individualistic approach to consumption and advocate not placing all responsibility for changing the world on the consumers' shoulders. However, this should not prevent scholars from acknowledging that ethical consumption exists as meaningful moments in practices. Building on the work by Barnett et al. (2010), one could argue for the concept of shared responsibility, which contrasts with a blame-focused understanding of responsibility and builds on the capacity to act. Thus, responsibility should be understood along with power, privilege, interest, and collective ability. Which actors have the power to change things is an important question.

Ethics of Care as Ethics in Context

Ethical judgements can be based on scientific knowledge or dialogue and identity. Furthermore, understanding ethics in a situated context is necessary. In the following paragraphs, I present the ethics of care as a concept that matches the ambiguity, contradictions, and discrepancies in everyday life, which the previous paragraphs described as related to ethical consumption from a theories of practice perspective.

In explaining the ethics of care, Mol et al. (2010) used the ethics of justice and its objective and measurable approach as a contrast. In the ethics of justice, Mol et al. stated that one could sort out universal principles of right and wrong, whereas, these principles are rarely productive in ethics of care:

...care implies a negotiation about how different goods might coexist in a given, specific, local practice. Though 'negotiation' is not quite the right term, as it calls up verbal argumentation. In practice, however, seeking a compromise between different 'goods' does not necessarily depend on talk, but can also be a matter of practical tinkering, of attentive experiments (Mol et al., 2010: 13).

The concept of the ethics of care has been related to theories of practice by Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016). Like Mol et al. (2010), their paper distinguishes between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. They expressed this distinction as 'taking care of' and 'caring for', respectively, where 'taking care of' links to universal standards and the ethics of justice, while 'caring for' is related to considerations in the phenomenological sense (Gherardi and Rodeschini, 2016). Table 3 presents an overview of the difference between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care.

Table 3: Difference in the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. Developed with inspiration from (Gherardi and Rodeschini, 2016; Mol et al., 2010).

| Ethics of justice | Ethics of care |
|---|--|
| Taking care of | Caring for |
| What is just | How to respond |
| Matters of fact | Matters of concern |
| Rationality and efficiency | Caring as a situated activity and collective competencies |
| Care as a noun: values and moral order of good and bad | Caring as a verb: situated practices and response to sensed needs |
| Explicit knowledge | Implicit knowledge |
| Logic of choice | Logic of care and of good care |
| Universal principles | Tinkering with bodies and materiality |

Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016) established how competencies and practices are performed in constellations linked together in sociomaterial relationships. Care is an emergent capacity of a cultural system, embracing that caring includes the carer's body and the cared-for body. In their expression, caring is a collective, knowledgeable doing, which exceeds formal education and training; thus, they are interested in how people learn how to care. This can be compared to Halkier's (2017) plea for a new way of communicating scientific knowledge, which, unlike other approaches, does not 'fail to capture mundane practices and thereby underestimate the embodied and intersected character of everyday life' (Halkier, 2017: 46).

As most of the work on the ethics of care is focused on the health sector, it naturally focuses on human care. However, Mol et al. (2010) took the notion of caring ethics further than human care to include how farmers and animals care for each other and how carpenters care for their work materials. In this regard, their notion is in line with Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who discussed how the ethics of care could be related to environmental questions of how individuals treat the soil and earth. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) described how the permaculture movement and their everyday systems and techniques embody care for the environment. Permaculture is a practice in which consumption and production are more directly linked and include direct sensing and interaction with the producing environments, such as soil, plants, and animals. This is different from most consumption in industrial societies, in which infrastructures of food, energy, and water provide the physical exchange between the sustaining environment and the people, leaving no possibility for direct sensing and interaction. Relating this to the ethics of care in the health sector is relevant, as caring in health must include trust in medical trials and science, whereas caring according to Table 3 contrasts with the ethics of justice based on the same modern rationality as science.

Thus, it is of interest to establish further how this combination of different forms of knowledge and ethics is combined in actual everyday practices, including the ethical aspects of consumption. In doing this, we can include what was described previously on how people can draw on discourse and knowledge and combine the reflexive and tacit in social interaction in their everyday practices (Halkier, 2020; Keller and Halkier, 2014).

Finding a Place for Ethics Within the Vocabulary of Theories of Practice

One aspect is how ethics work in everyday practices, whereas another is how to conceptualise ethics within the vocabulary of theories of practice. Meanings and teleo-affectivity are important parts of what holds practices together; however, these are specific to each of the different practices they are sustaining. The teleo-affectivity of cooking relates to the specific goal of the meal. In contrast, the concept of ethics that I discuss applies many different practices. Ethics related to sustainability (having less impact on the environment) may influence how we cook, transport ourselves, or heat our homes, but ethics is never the goal of these practices. In this regard, my interest is in line with the approaches examining how culture can be conceptualised within theories of practice (Sahakian et al., 2020; Welch et al., 2020) or how larger phenomena threading through practices can be conceptualised (Hui et al., 2017). The concept of general understandings from Schatzki (2002) is suggested in some of this work (Welch et al., 2020; Welch and Warde, 2017) and is also the approach I suggest.

General understandings is not a widely used concept, but a chapter from Welch and Warde (2017) presented it for further scrutiny. Welch and Warde described how 'general understandings' are tacit and related to discourse and include how these are combined. According to Welch and Warde (2017), researchers should be cautious not to view general understanding as something outside of practices because this would challenge the position that practices are at the centre of understanding the social. Thus, general understanding is not a distinct ontological level but intersects with specific formations and configurations of practices. Furthermore, it is not general understandings that directly explains the action. Thus, conceptualising ethics as a general understanding also includes the assumption that ethics can never be considered a direct explanation for a given performance or carrying of a practice.

Relevant questions related to ethics, understood as general understandings, include where general understandings (ethics) comes from and what transfers this between different configurations of practices. Here, it is again important to note that general understandings operates both discursively and prereflexively, in contract to discourse. According to Schatzki (2017), some discourse analysis is compatible with theories of practice. As Keller and Halkier (2014) described, discourse can translate into practices by practitioners drawing on, miming from, or arguing by them. This can help answer questions of translation from general understandings to specific configurations of practice. Further, ideas on social interaction (Halkier, 2020) can explicate how routines and reflexivity interact and, thus, how the ethics of care in specific localised contexts takes part in forming different practices.

Welch and Warde (2017) suggested that general understandings exhibits three functions. The first is an organising function, which related to ethical consumption, I propose can be viewed in the way people organise communities around specific forms of ethical consumption. Second, general understandings sit across the pre-reflexive and the discursive, which, concerning ethical consumption is important because ethical consumption is not only verbal and reflexive but also unconscious and bodily. Third, general understandings enables intelligibility by singling out what to do in specific situations. Concerning ethics, I find this interesting as other general understandings (e.g., by cultures implying what is right and wrong socially in a given circumstance) may be at stake in the same specific situations and should thus be linked to

how the ethics of care describe the situated conciliation between contradictions and controversies, which are always part of everyday life.

Ethics in consumer practices is not a practice in itself; rather, it is a general understanding threading through many different practices, depending on the specific context and situation. This general understanding may be at work in some specific practices and not in others. The concept of the ethics of care can help explicate how the often bodily and unconscious conciliation between many different and contradicting considerations occurs and, thus, why the general understanding of ethics may be overruled in some cases and not in others.

Conclusion

This paper is interested in the degree to which and how ethics among consumers may change practices in a more sustainable direction. Answering this question implies empirical research; however, an adequate theoretical framework is required in doing this. My point of departure for developing such a framework was in the theories of practice, which, for several reasons, have had a distanced relation to the questions of ethical consumption. Researchers have warned against individualising consumption and against placing too much responsibility and hope on the shoulders of consumers (Barnett et al., 2010; Evans, 2011). However, not including people is also not giving people a chance to take part in creating a sustainable future. Moreover, research has shown that a sustainable future requires people because technology, infrastructure, and policy cannot achieve these alone (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2018).

In developing theories of practice to better include people, I described how gender, race, and class can and should be included in explaining variation in performing and carrying practices. Relations between practices, including temporal aspects, material possessions, geographical location, competency, and meaning, are all parameters that vary with gender, life course, and socioeconomics. Understanding social variation in practices is part of understanding their dynamics and trajectories. The interest in how ethics forms trajectories of practices also includes questions of socioeconomic variations in the way ethics interact with everyday practices.

Research based on theories of practice has shown how ambivalence and controversy are part of everyday life and consumer practices (Halkier, 2020). Understanding how ethics may take part in shaping practices is not about finding simple connections behind actions. The concept of the ethics of care can handle this situatedness and describe how practices related to caring are bodily, ambivalent, and contextual (Mol et al., 2010). Although the ethics of care has been contrasted with the logic of natural science, the ethics of care also works in parallel with evidence-based natural science, which can be inspirational when understanding how consumers combine science-based communication with bodily experiences in finding more sustainable ways of living. Caring does not belong to the individual; rather, it is part of a collective cultural praxis of knowing and learning (Gherardi and Rodeschini, 2016). In this paper, I argued that placing ethics in the concept of general understandings works by including cultural and value-based phenomena, which intersect several practices and offer insight into larger phenomena, such as complexes of practices, sociocultural groups, or other slices of praxis.

This paper contributes to understanding ethical consumption related to sustainability as moments in practices where people who are carrying and performing practices are consciously or bodily aware of doing things in a less environmentally harmful way. Being bodily aware means that some ways of performing a practice are learned and routinised through social interaction or reflections, including media discourse and information campaigns. It does not imply consistency across different practices or in the performance of the same practice related to ethics. Ethics or general understandings, related to other fields than

sustainability, such as what it implies to be a good parent or a good host, may draw the performance of a practice in more, rather than less, environmentally harmful ways in specific situations.

My main goal of developing a theoretical understanding of ethics within theories of practice is to find ways of conducting empirical work to answer questions of how ethics take part in forming practice trajectories. Seeking answers to this question and building on the presented framework, the research questions that emerge include how general understandings of ethics may or may not spread from one field (e.g., mobility, food, waste, or housing) to another. Of similar importance is how general understandings of ethics spreads from some groups of consumers to other groups and when it does not. Dilemmas and controversies are always part of how ethical consumption is handled in everyday practice. Relevant empirical questions include whether similarities exist in how these are handled and to what extent this varies with the fields of consumption and types of consumers. Further, are there controversies and dilemmas that stand out where other types of general understandings, norms, or cultures are persistent in outdoing ethics related to sustainable consumption? Finally, identity and distinction may also work in relation to ethics as understood within theories of practice. A relevant question is what happens if practices are normalised and lose their distinct power?

This paper encourages the further building of a research tradition, taking a theories of practice perspective as the starting point in ways that acknowledge insight from previous consumer studies, including the understanding of how culture, identity, and discourse take part in forming practices and how ethical consumption may be part of changing unsustainable consumption. In this way, future sustainable consumption studies may be more attuned to understanding and guiding us for a highly needed sustainable transition.

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